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UNCLAS ATHENS 002151

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: GOG WORKS TO RESPOND TO CRASH OF CYPRIOT AIRCRAFT

1. (U) Summary: The GoG has swung into action to cope with the crash of Cypriot airliner Helios Flight 522. The Hellenic Air Accident Investigation Board has taken charge of the investigation. A National Transportation Safety Board team has arrived, along with Boeing technical experts, to provide assistance. At this time the investigation is in the most preliminary of stages, and no findings have been made. The flight data and cockpit voice recorders have been recovered and sent to labs in Paris for evaluation. End Summary.

2. (U) The Sunday, August 14th crash of Helios flight 522, a Cypriot airliner en route from Larnaca to Athens, was the worst civil aviation accident in Greek history. Although the country was at a virtual standstill because of a local holiday, the Greek disaster response was swift. Police, emergency medical and fire teams responded immediately to the site. Although there were no survivors, the fires caused by the accident were contained, and access to the site was secured, ensuring integrity of the crash debris. Captain Akrivos Tsolakis, the Chairman of the Hellenic National Air Accident Investigation and Safety Board (AISB), has been appointed the investigator in charge, and is receiving the cooperation of the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Transportation, and Greek Air Force in carrying out the accident investigation. He has indicated his full cooperation with all interested parties according to Annex 13 of the International Civil Aviation Organization Convention.

3. (U) The first action taken by the AISB was to locate and secure the remains of the victims of Flight 522 and secure the site for investigatory purposes. The bodies were transported to morgues throughout the Athens metropolitan area for autopsies. Tsolakis was aware of the importance of obtaining post-mortem evidence, but was also clear that the Greek government wanted to assist in the positive identification and repatriation of the remains as swiftly as possible. Cypriot families have already begun arriving in Greece to identify and claim the bodies of the victims. According to Tsolakis, all but three bodies have been recovered. It is not clear at this time if those unaccounted for are truly missing or if there are errors or discrepancies in the passenger and crew manifest.

4. (U) Four NTSB and one FAA expert arrived on Monday, August 16th, and were joined later in the day by representatives of Boeing Corporation and Helios Airlines. French experts, representing the manufacturer of the engines, have also arrived. The U.S. team has fully integrated with the Greek authorities, and are helping to preserve information from the accident; overseeing and assisting in the transportation of wreckage of the aircraft to a more controlled site. The flight data recorder and cockpit voice recorder were both been recovered and sent to France for examination before the arrival of the NTSB team. Tsolakis invited NTSB to designate a representative to be present in France to observe the reading of the recorder data.

5. (U) Local press reports have largely mirrored international reports, ranging from informed to speculative, but so far have been devoid of wild conspiracy theories. The NTSB team has been mentioned in local press, but apart from minor misunderstandings of ICAO Annex 13 rights and obligations, there has been no derogatory speculation about their presence or their role.

6. (U) On August 16, Ambassador met with the family of Amcit Sofocleous, so far the only Amcit confirmed killed in the accident, upon their arrival at Athens Airport, to offer condolences, and the Embassy consular section will continue to assist the family as needed

7. (U) Comment: The Embassy will continue to provide full support to the NTSB team, as well as to the GoG in dealing with the situation and its aftermath. The Greek AISB is an exceedingly small organization, and while competent, has no experience in dealing with a disaster or investigation of this magnitude. The NTSB has offered additional personnel assistance if requested, an offer that it is likely to be taken up. End Comment.

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